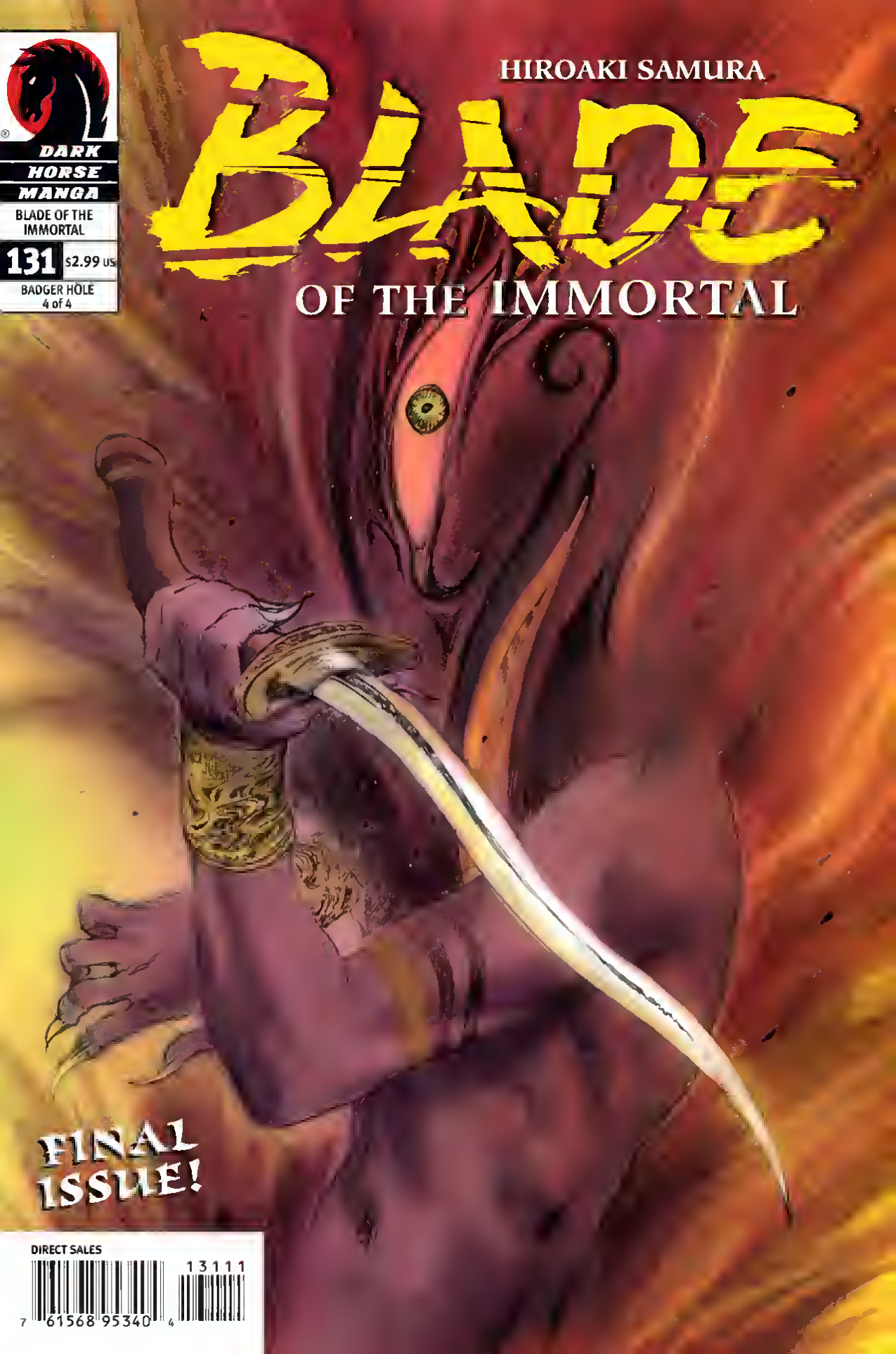
DARK HORSE MANGA
BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL
131
$2.99 US
BADGER HOLE
4 of 4
HIROAKI SAMURA
BLADE
OF THE IMMORTAL
FINAL ISSUE!
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BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL

art, story, and front cover by

HIROAKI SAMURA

translation by DANA LEWIS

lettering and retouch by TOMOKO SAITO

cover colors by RYAN HILL

Interior back cover pinup by VASILIS LOLOS • Color back cover pinup by ZACHARY BALDUS

A note from Studio Proteus founder, TOREN SMITH

The first time I cracked open an issue of *Afternoon* and saw *Blade of the Immortal*, I knew we had to publish it over here. Samura was a weak comics artist at the time, but his drawing skill was still mind-blowing. Having seen how quickly an artist can grow with a diet of regular work (being around Adam Warren gave me a personal experience), I knew he'd settle in and get very, very good indeed.

But there was a catch. Speaking to Samura, he was dubious about flopping his art. Since this was back in the "Dark Ages," when retailers and distributors were wary of unflopped manga, we didn't have much choice. Still, initially he refused. Later, after the first tankobon had come out, I sat down with it and partway through had a realization. As his layout and storytelling skills had matured, he had moved to an unusual style—almost all of his panels were rectangular. For an idea of how odd this is, grab any manga off your shelf and compare. I made a few photocopies of his pages and pasted them up with the panels unreversed, but the order of the panels reversed. It worked. Studio Proteus put together a sequence of about ten pages and sent them off to Samura, and he was intrigued. While he had done some work early on that was not amenable to this technique, he suggested that he'd redraw a few panels here and there as needed. I knew we could trim bleeds and if I kept sharp while doing the rewrite I could move the readers along correctly with strategic repositioning of the word balloons and tweaking the dialogue. Except for a few cases where I got brain fade and screwed up, I think it worked pretty well. Hey, it's tough to read each panel knowing it will be unflopped...and yet reordered on the page! For the first couple volumes I actually cut and pasted each page, but eventually I was able to do it in my head, on the fly. All of my mistakes were corrected in the trade collections, and after Tomoko came on board, there were essentially none, since she kept an eagle eye on this.

Blade has its ups and downs, but overall it's one of the best series I ever worked on. Samura really is a genius, and his artwork has gotten better and better. His ability to control a tone using just a pencil is almost superhuman, as you can see from his pinups and illustration-style art. The vast cast of characters was really fun to work with and his strong sense of character made translation and rewriting a pleasure. (If I had to choose a favorite character, it would be Hyakurin.)

I've been blessed to work on some very fine manga indeed, but I have to put *Blade of the Immortal* in my top ten. It was hard to move off the series when I did, but at the time I really had no choice. Fortunately, it's chugged along just fine without me. Having top talent like Tomoko Saito and Dana Lewis working on it pretty much guaranteed the end result would be superb, and it has been. Thanks to all the editors, designers, and others who have worked on *Blade*. they've all done a great job.

—Toren Smith, September 2007

art by TOMOKO SAITO

designer SCOTT COOK editorial assistant RYAN JORGENSEN

editor PHILIP SIMON publisher MIKE RICHARDSON

www.darkhorse.com • To find a comics shop near you, call the Comic Shop Locator Service at 1-888-266-4226

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無限の住人

BADGER HOLE

-part four-

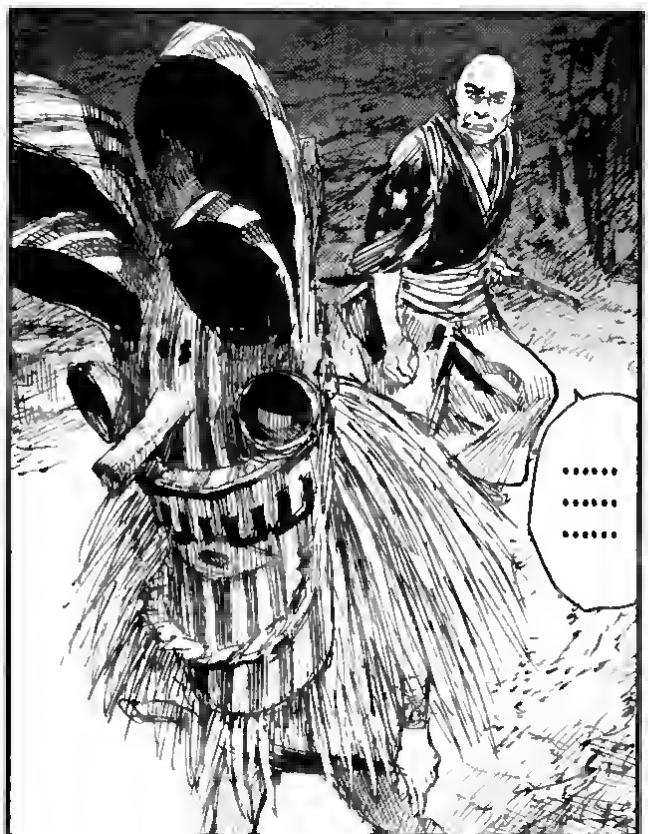
EEEEEEE
SHRIEEE

WHAT A... HIDEOUS *NOISE*... A *FLUTE*?!

EEE EEEE
EEE
WHERE'S IT ECHO-ING FROM?!
EE
GAHRRR! STOP IT! PLEASE!!
IT'S DRIVING ME CRAZY !!
EEE

EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

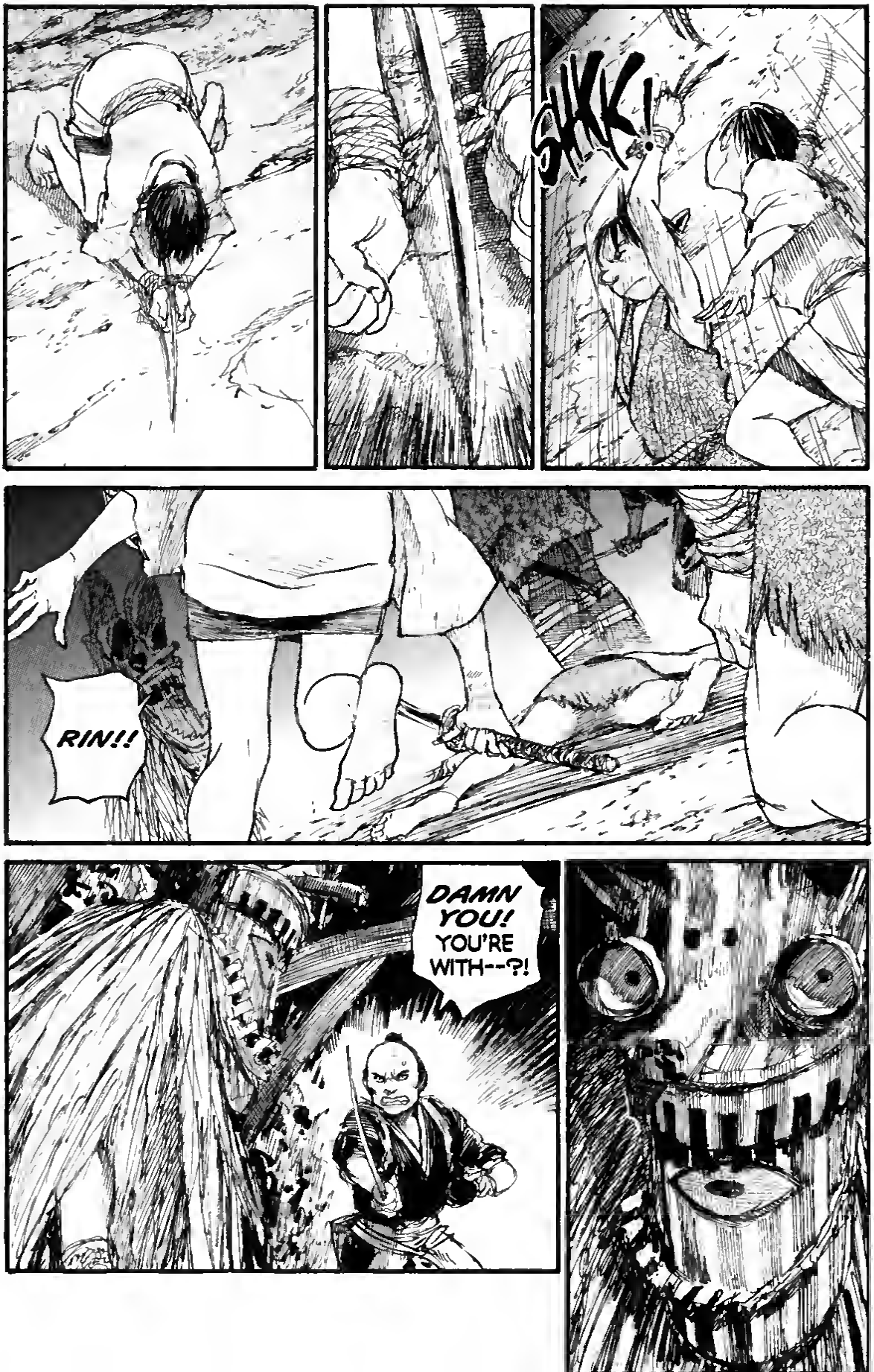
H-
HALT!
WHA-?!
EEHH?!
WHAT
THE--?!
AHHN...?!
WH-WH-
WHAT
THE HELL
ARE
YOU?!



BWEEEEEEEEEE
GAH!!
NO!!
GUH...
BASTARD!
CUT IT
OUUUT!!
SPANG

THOK
AAIII EEEE!!
WHA...?

!!
SPAKK!
KLANG
THEP

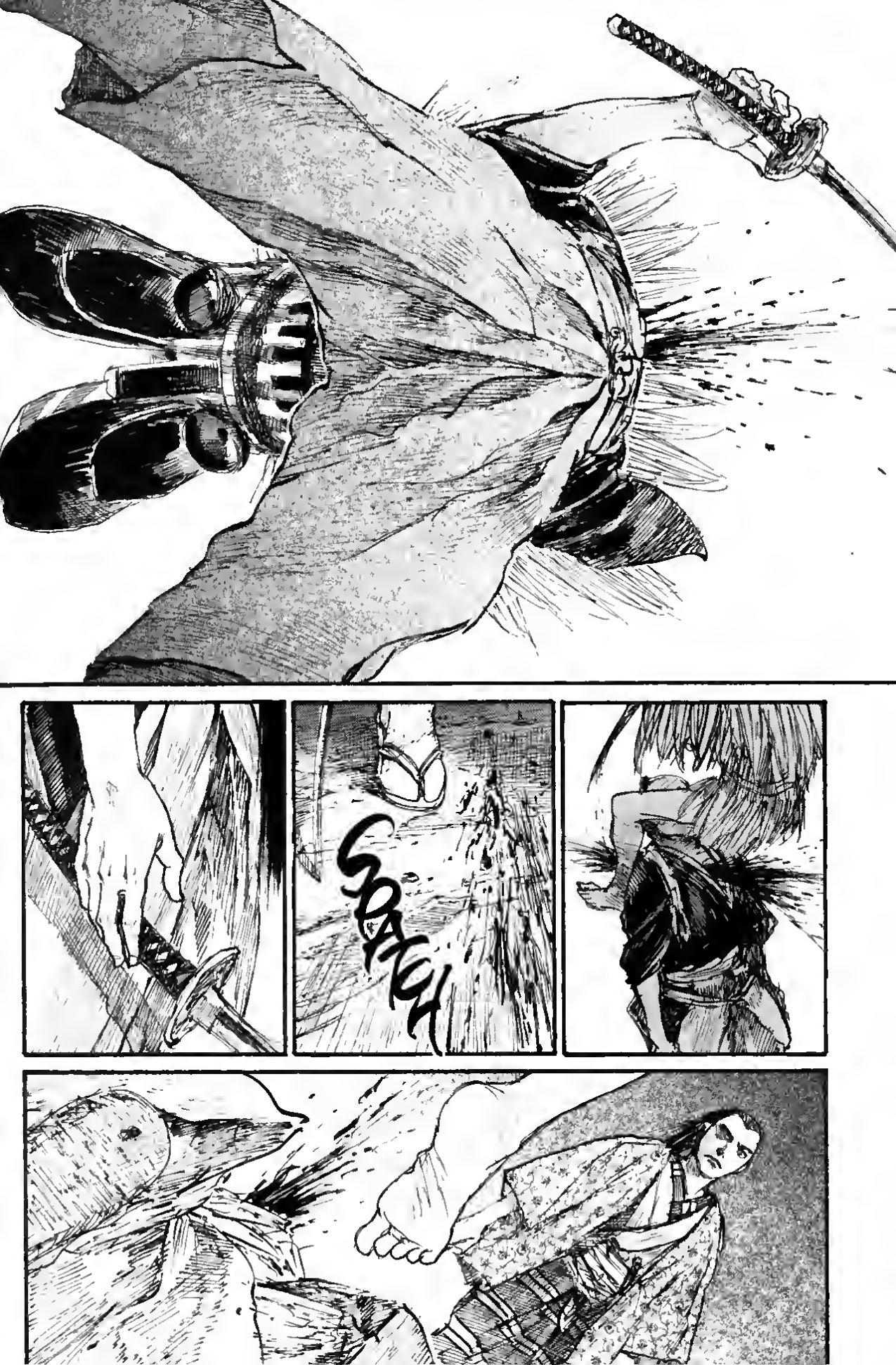

SHKK!
RIN!!
DAMN YOU! YOU'RE WITH--?!

UOHH!

SHUFF

Y-YOU STINK!!
G-GET OFF! IDIOT!

PUDD
GHK!


SPATCH

YOUR ARMS ARE DIS-LOCATED. JUST... HOLD ON!
HAH HAH HAH!
WHAT... NOW?!

HEY, YOU!!
TAKE OFF THE MASK!
YOU DON'T MIND, RIGHT?! NOT AN ETIQUETTE THING...
...I'M JUST CURIOUS! WHAT KINDA GUY YOU--
TWEE TEE
!!
THAM!

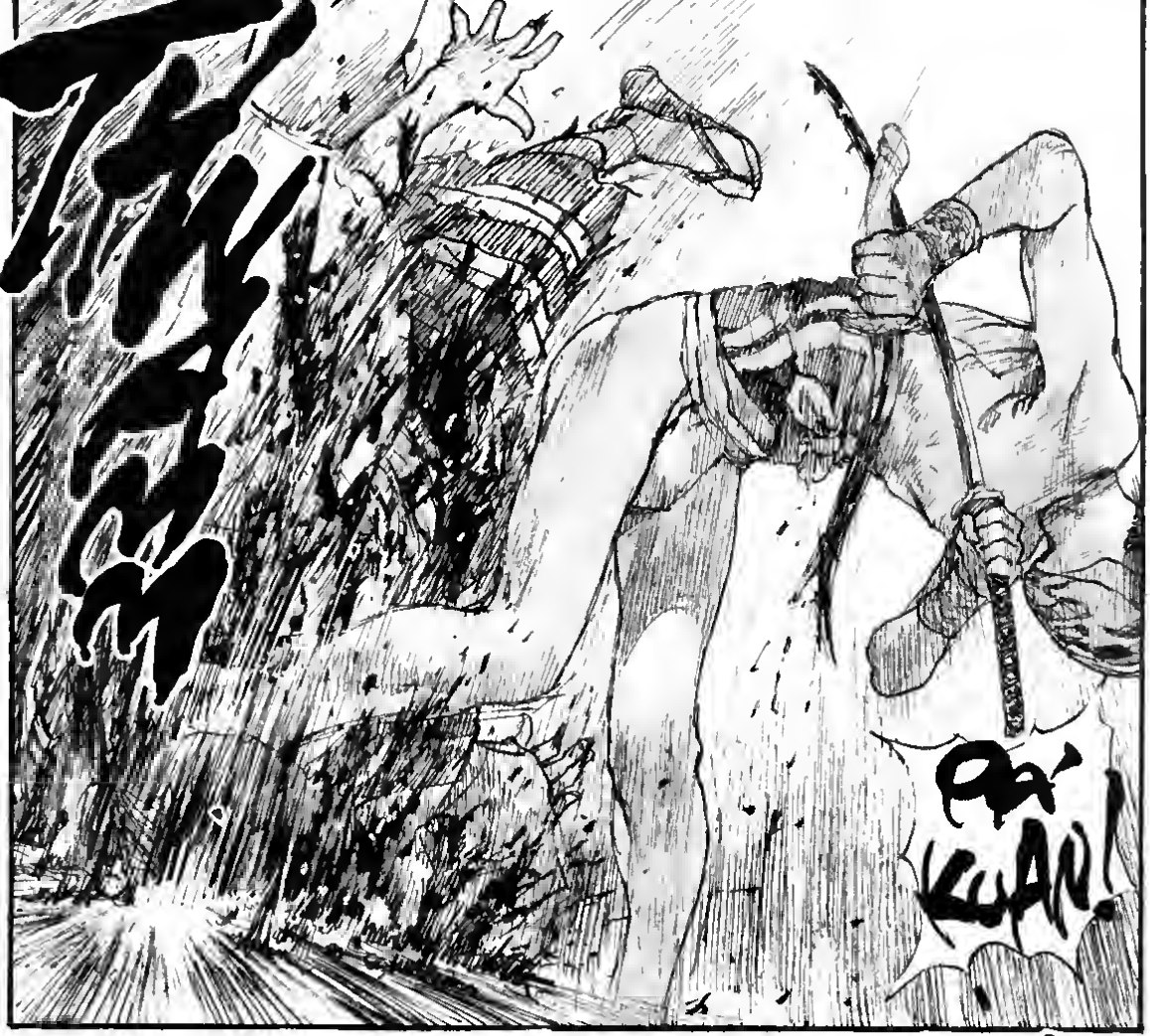
FOUKK!
SPATCH!
!
BOUF!

HA HA HA HA HA!
TAKE THAT! NOW WHAT'LL YOU DO?!
WHAT THE HECK? PAPER MACHÉ?!
HEY, HEY! BURNS FAST, NO?! BETTER HURRY AN--
HUH?

!!
BWOSH
FWSSH
SHI--!!

Ahh!
Eek!!
Swoop!

SLOK
O'PAU!
PAU!
PAU!


KWAN!

ROI' HA!!
ROI' HAAA!

.....
.....
.....

UH-HUH. WE CALL HIM OZUHAN.
.....
.....
ITTŌ-RYŪ?
HE USES THAT WHISTLE TO FREAK OUT THE ENEMY.
SAYS IT DOESN'T BOTHER HIM.
THE MOST DIFFICULT ITTŌ-RYŪ FIGHTER TO WORK WITH. HANDS DOWN!
CAN'T IMAGINE WHY...
MAH.
MAH!
OZU-HAN!
WHAT'RE YOU DOING HERE? EH? WHAT?

TAILED US... FROM THE ENTRANCE?
KASHIN KOJI ASKED YOU?! REALLY?!
THEN HELP US SOONER, HUH?!
MIDWAY? YOU GOT LOST?! DUMMY!
AND WHY THE STUPID MASK?
SHE'S GOOD...
SNEAK IN? IN SE-CRET?
ANY-ONE'D NOTICE!!
...MM...
IT'S OKAY... NOTHING'S BROKEN...

...SO WHY... ALL ON YOUR-SELF?
EH? OH. OH, THAT...
I MEAN, IF YOU'RE INJURED, WE'RE FINISHED.
DON'T LOOK AT ME LIKE THAT. IT'S LIKE WHAT HE SAID...
...MAYBE WE'RE SAVING OUR FRIENDS...
I NEVER THOUGHT WE'D GET OFF FREE.
...BUT WE'RE KILLING AS WE GO.
SO! LET'S GO.
RIGHT... HUH?
HUH?!

WHERE'S NANDA-RŌ?!

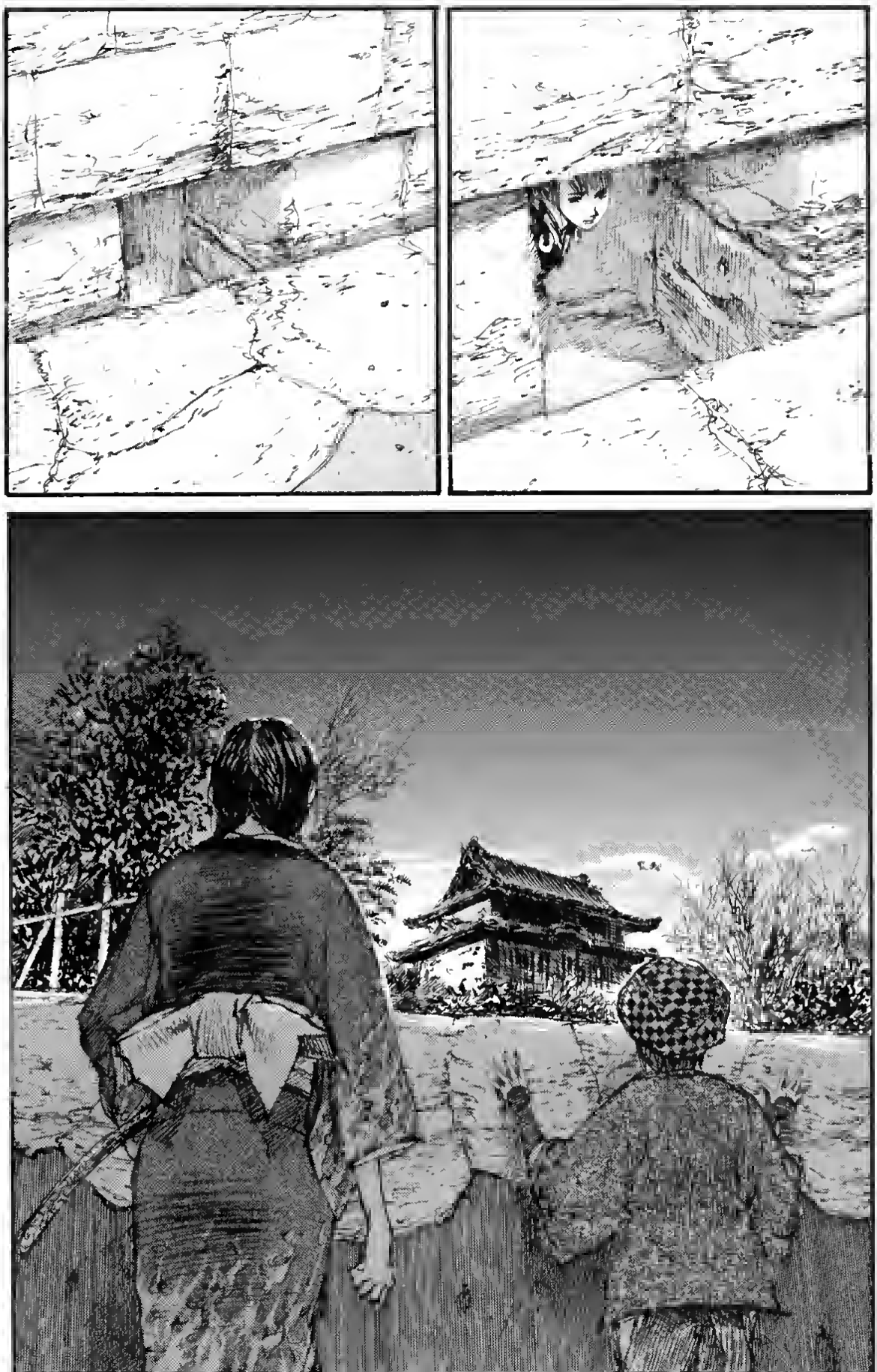
YOU THINK HE RAN AWAY...?
THAT LITTLE RAT!
ACTUALLY, ANYONE WOULD.

BUT... THIS IS BAD. OUR CARGO...
.....
.....
.....

UHOHH!!

HABAKI-DONO.
I WAS ASKED...
WHO'S IT FROM?
AYAME-DONO, SIR.
BURAN-DO?!

NOTE: SUCCESS



WOW! IS *THAT*... THE *CASTLE*?!
EDO CASTLE DOESN'T *HAVE* A *TENSHU*, REMEMBER?
JUST A *YAGURA*.
CAN'T PASS AS BEGGARS WITH OZUHAN ALONG, SO THEY'VE CHANGED BACK.
HWUFF.
SO WHAT TO DO? IF WE FOUND A BEGGAR...
...HE *COULD* GUIDE US. BUT IT'S SO VAST...
DŌA! GET IT OUT.

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE *BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL* TRADE COLLECTIONS!!

END OF AN ERA
A RETROSPECTIVE

This is the end of an era, for the final issue of *Blade of the Immortal* also marks the end of the last regular manga series to be published in North America in comic book form. Manga today are so strongly associated in North America with the graphic novel format that we forget this has only been the industry standard for the last five of the past twenty years—an industry that began in May of 1987 with the release of *Lone Wolf and Cub* issue #1 from the now-defunct (but progressive in their time) First Comics—a title, of course, later to be picked up and completed by Dark Horse.

Many new manga story genres have been introduced into the U.S. market in the years since, but I like the fact that this era ends right where it began, with an epic saga of warriors in old Japan. Like the cowboy, it seems safe to say the samurai has now proven himself a shape of hero people still want to read about, long after their times have passed. It should be noted as well that *Blade of the Immortal* is more than half as old as the U.S. manga industry itself; its run of eleven years and five months is, I believe, the longest any manga ever had in monthly comics format. That kind of staying power for a title any American comics company would be proud of, and we have you, the readers, to thank for it.

pin up by Russel Fox

All through the late 1980s, the 1990s, and the turn of the century, manga in the U.S. thought of itself as part of the American comic books industry—by which I don't mean its publishers rejected or hid its Japanese identity, so much as they used what Japanese creators had to offer to consciously compete within the U.S. comics arena. People sometimes get the impression today that they live in an era of "authentic" manga, as compared to the "Westernized" versions of the past, but looking back on it, you realize that in practical terms this is debatable.

Believe me: flopped or not, nobody in those not-so-long-ago days ever mistook manga for American comics; the reading direction made little difference to the essentials, and often the fine details, of how these Japanese creators' work came across in English. Some comics readers were down with manga; more accepted the influences of manga but didn't read manga themselves; many, perhaps most, remained indifferent to what manga had to offer. And you would quite often have patronizing and stereotypical dismissals of manga in the U.S. comics scene—fans and critics writing of it in terms that reminded you of running up to an Asian kid at recess, and pulling up the corners of your eyes.

The explosion of manga in the past five years is not so much due to a new "authenticity," or new care paid to their adaptation (in fact there is often less care paid now than Studio Proteus would have ever tolerated), but to new genres of manga becoming available through new publishing and distribution practices. On balance, it's a good thing. But that certainly doesn't imply that what came before must have been a bad thing. Philip and I both began as manga editors in that age, and although I've got to cut this short and get back to my own books ^_^ I could say a lot more, and that's how I intend to keep honoring the achievement represented by the words: *Blade of the Immortal* #131.

—Carl Gustav Horn, September 2007

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KESSEN-CHU BLUES

In last month's "Letter From the Editor," I hoped to prepare everyone for the issue you now hold (or have clenched) in your hands: the final English-language *Blade of the Immortal* comic book. I would like to reiterate my *pride* in being able to edit these *Blade of the Immortal* monthlies for four fun years. Hiroaki Samura's wonderful, relentless manga series has always been an important and necessary escape for me. I enjoy a good cliffhanger, and Samura-dono is certainly a master at that. I also enjoy stories that are serialized (in comic books, newspaper comics, television shows . . .), so I'll miss these monthly episodes as much as you will. I was reading *Blade of the Immortal* as a monthly fan before coming to Dark Horse Comics, so I really am living a dream come true—and I'm very grateful. My favorite *Blade* moment (so far) is found in *Blade of the Immortal* #50—the entire last story page (or the last story page in the first "Gathering" trade collection—*Blade of the Immortal* volume eight). A confident Manji . . . a slash . . . the dumbfounded expressions on his opponents. The first two panels alone say it all. Giichi's my favorite character. I wish we could have done more thick, celebratory issues like *Blade of the Immortal* #100. My favorite single-issue story just might be "Pity," seen in *Blade* #103—Samura using two supporting characters to create such successful tension. As a fan, I thank Mike Richardson for keeping this series going for about two years longer than it might have, had it been published by another company. Mike's kept *Blade of the Immortal* on the stands since June 1996, giving it the heavyweight belt for longest-running single-title manga series in the United States!

Thank YOU, dear Samura fan, for staying faithful to our twisted, thirty-two-page excursion into darkness every month. You're the person this comic was intended for, and I hope you've been having a good time and have been enjoying all the extras and odd bonuses I've tried to add into every issue. I'd like to thank everyone else who helped get this amazing series delivered to you, but I'd just be listing off all of our Dark Horse employee names. (I'll thank you in person, comrades, if you come to my cubicle and tell me what your favorite *Blade of the Immortal* scene is so far.)

Toren Smith, Dana Lewis, and Tomoko Saito are the Holy Trinity of *Blade of the Immortal*. My assistant Ryan Jorgensen has been trying to keep me sane, and our designer Scott Cook has been telling me to stay crazy, as he's been game for every idea and last minute change that I've had—wearing an encouraging smile all the while. Debra Bailey was designing *Blade* right before Scott was, and she made my transition from *Blade* assistant editor to *Blade* editor a breeze some four years ago. Special thanks to Amy Arendts for giving this series a classy redesign back in 1998, "Miles Davis" Estrada and Cara "Lifesaver" for keeping all of our ships afloat, and Tim Ervin for saying, "Here—you're quite ready to do this." Chris and Samantha have kept the collected volumes rolling. Michael Gombos, Riko Frohnmayer, and Lance Kreiter have been my links to Kodansha over the years, ordering materials and sending covers and pages for approvals. Special thanks to our wonderful friends at Kodansha, especially Shohei Yoshida, Kohei Furukawa, Tomoko Suga, Niki Ueda, Hideko Morooka, and Ai Fukuhara. Thanks to the Dark Horse editors and assistants who've worked on past issues . . . Dave Chipps, Rachel Penn, Mike Hansen, and Tim Ervin as editors . . . and Dan Harris, Jeremy Barlow, Jason Lee, Mike Carriglitto, and Matt Pyon as assistants. Dan Jackson and Ryan Hill were my mischievous coloring shamans for non-Samura-painted front covers—thank you both for your patience and spectacular work. Jhomar Soriano deserves a standing ovation for sending in his great parody strips and pinups. I've already thanked YOU, dear reader, but I better thank you again . . . and, after all, this wonderful bloodbath will continue in Dark Horse Manga's collected *Blade of the Immortal* volumes! So I'll see you there!

Our monthly meetings are over, but long live the trade collections! And long live Manji! (Or not, if he doesn't want to.)

—Philip Simon, October 2007

A GREEN GIANT SCAN

LIKE IT?
BUY IT!

DCP